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ABSTRACT

It is argued that content-based teaching effectively teaches language skills while supporting development of critical thinking, intercultural communication, and student participation. The content provides cognitive and conceptual links needed for naturalistic language learning, and student participation in selection of content increases motivation. A model of content-based language teaching posits a continuous process in which evaluation of learner errors stimulates development of appropriate content-compatible language objectives. Sample content-based activities are described, including games in which students elicit information from each other to construct a script, paragraph, or chart. Guidelines for designing class activities and for adapting instructional material to student skill level are offered. Implications of the content-based approach for teaching English as a second language are outlined. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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Enriching Learners' Language Production through Content-based Instruction.

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Enriching Learners' Language Production through Content-based Instruction.

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Growing interest exists in a model of language learning that combines language (aspects and skills) with content instruction in the English as an Additional Language (EAL) classroom. This approach to language teaching contrasts with existing models that believe the study of literature produces higher level language skills/thinking patterns. Content-based instruction teaches language skills using substantive contented which supports the development of critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and active citizenship.

Cognitive and language development is closely related for young children (Vacca, Vacca and Gove, 1995). Through language children come to understand the world. In L1 acquisition these processes occur naturally. On the other hand, the literature-based model for teaching young learners disconnects language learning from cognitive/academic development including prohibiting and controlling the learner's rate of acquisition. An integrated content-based approach joins cognitive/academic development with language learning.

Furthermore, language is learned most effectively when communication is meaningful, socially purposeful and challenging academically. In real life, people use language to talk about what they know and what they want to know more about. They do not talk about language itself, unless it is their job. What children know and need to know more about is the purpose of education. However, in a typical school-setting language learning and content are often treated as independent processes, even if there have been ministerial guidelines about interdisciplinary teaching. This decision-making process underlines the mechanistic mentality with which the Ministry of Education thinks, far removed from the students' wants and needs.

Whereas the move toward interdisciplinary teaching is a concept I fully embrace, limiting this teaching style only to literature as some have suggested, is a grave discredit to the individuals learning language. This limits the learning possibilities of the learners and prevents them from developing their fullest possible potential. This arbitrary imposing of limits reduces our learners competitive edge in a European Union job market that is more and more demanding. It also ill prepares them for active participation in a world which grows smaller each day as technical advances bring us closer and closer together.

Another underlying rationale for content-based language learning is that the integration of content with language teaching provides a substantive basis for language teaching and learning (Snow, 1989). Content can provide a motivational and cognitive basis for language learning. Content provides a primary motivational incentive for language learning because it is interesting and of some value tot he learner and thus worth learning. Language will be learned because it provides access to content.

Content provides real meaning that is an inherent feature of naturalistic language learning. Content provides conceptual or cognitive hangers on which language functions and structures can be hung. When language learning is based on trivial abstractions devoid of conceptual or communicative meaning, learner motivation is low and memory recall short. If motivational and cognitive bases are to be realized, then content must be selected which is important and interesting to the learner. One way in which that can be done is a survey (Figure 1.) in which the learners are asked to express their opinions and establish learning objectives.

Figure 1.

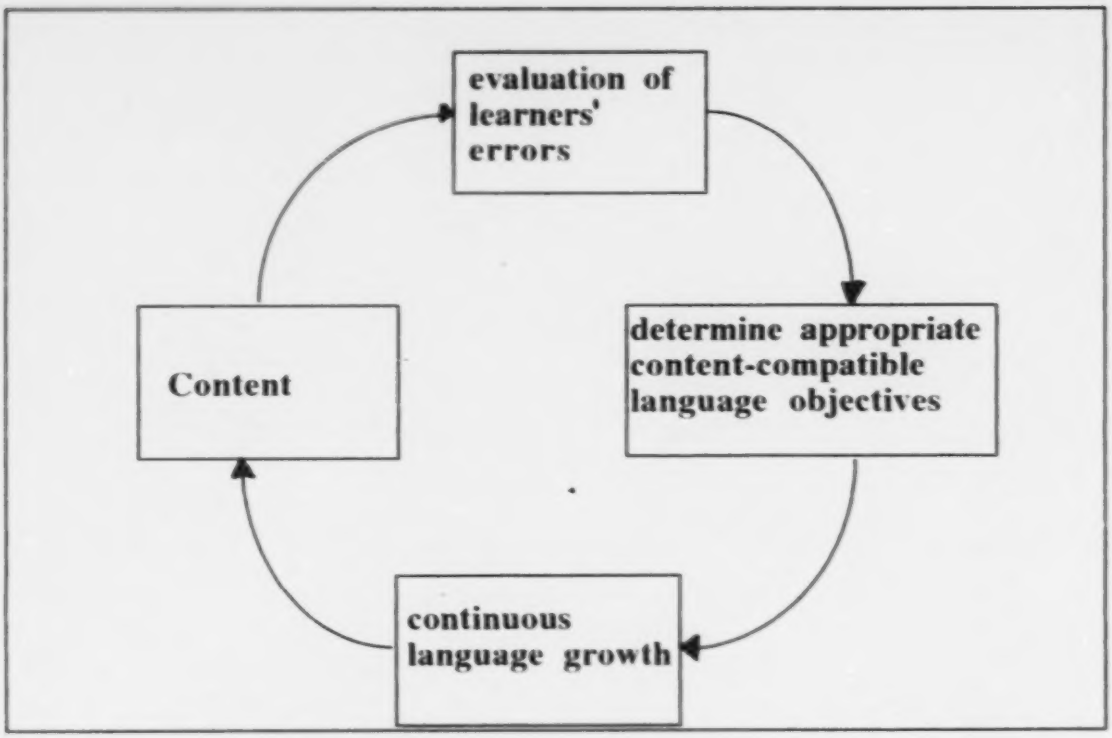
Topics for Class...

Listed below are possible discussion/learning topics. Please choose five from this list and number them 1 - 5, with one being the most important, 2 the second, and so forth. The five topics receiving the most votes, will be included in the copy of *Using the Language of Justice and Peace*. You can purchase it at the photocopy center.

_____ environment
_____ immigration
_____ advertising
_____ American culture: not what you see on TV or in the movies
_____ 1492, Europe's first experience of multi-culturalism
_____ Conscientious objection and war
_____ racism
_____ AIDS/HIV
_____ Nuclear bombs/ energy
_____ human rights
_____ global economy
_____ conflict resolution
_____ Native Peoples: their philosophies and lifestyles
_____ New Colonialism
_____ male/female communication
_____ sexuality
_____ health
_____ peer pressure
_____ women in the world
_____ bioethics: (artificial insemination, death with dignity, organ transplants)

A forth reason for developing content-based language curricula concerns the intrinsic characteristics of language variation. It is interesting to explore some of the general ways language is used outside the classroom with primary attention on specific genres and registers (Heath 1983, Wells 1981).

Diagram of content-base instruction.



The model being proposed recognizes of the importance of language structures, skills or functions that are characteristic of different content areas. These skills can be identified as:

- informed speculation about what kinds of language skills or function are called for
- informal observation of the language requirements of specific content areas
- systematic analysis of students' actual language needs

Another reason for changing to a content-based approach is the success of immersion models of foreign language learning. Evidence from these programmes provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of language learning through content. Research reveals that students in immersion programmes learn the academic content specified in the school curriculum and develop significant levels of foreign language proficiency at the same time (Genesse, 1987, Lambert & Tucker 1972).

Cummins' (1980, 1981) work was fundamental in providing the theoretical structure for considering the integration of language and content instruction. He proposed a paradigm in which language tasks may be characterized as context reduced or content embedded and in which the tasks addressed through language may be cognitively demanding or undemanding. In content-embedded language tasks, support for meaning is readily available through the immediate communicative situation and the application of learning strategies, whether through background knowledge or through visual and/or contextual clues.

As language teachers we need to avoid the creation of cognitively undemanding situations in our attempts to render language meaningful by providing contextual clues and

supports. Cognitively undemanding activities stymie motivation and higher order thinking skills.

In contrast in a language programme based on the integration of language and content, it is possible to practice language by applying it to more sophisticated tasks. Charmot and O'Malley's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) is a good example of this theory in practice.

In a content-based approach, language curriculum is altered so that language objectives and content objectives are compatible with each other. For example, teaching about the weather is best done when the students are studying about it in science class. In this way students engage in active application of lexis, structures and notions around the weather.

Ongoing evaluation of students' difficulties with the L_2 also provides a rich source of information for specifying content-compatible objectives. Research has shown (Genesee 1987, Swain & Lopkim 1982) that students often attain very high levels in the passive skills (reading/listening), but do not approximate native-speakers in the active skills (speaking/writing). One result of such findings points out the over-emphasis on incorporating traditional forms of grammar instruction does not build better language students. An alternative is to use analysis of students' language or communication difficulties to determine appropriate content-compatible language objectives. These objectives then provide the teacher the structure for increased input of correct structures and for extended output through student practice.

Once persistent errors are identified, instructional activities can be designed that are either integrated into the subject matter or taught directly in the language classroom.

EXAMPLES OF CONTENT-BASED ACTIVITIES.

The Inside/Outside Game.

Skills: Academic note taking, summary writing, developing oral narration skills.

Divide the class into 2 teams. One team leaves the room. The "inside" team is read a script heavily leaded with target language (numbers, descriptive adjectives, directions, sequence indicators, etc.). The inside team can take notes while listening, if they want. The outside team returns to the classroom and pairs up with an inside team member. Each inside team member communicates information they heard to the partner and can refer to their notes to help them recall all the information.

To support strategy development/prediction skills, the outside team can be given the first line of the reading passage to work on while they are outside. Their task is to predict what the passage will be about. Hypothesis developing is encouraged in this way.

The activity concludes with the instructor eliciting information about the script from members of the outside team.

Infograms.

Skills: question formation skills, higher thinking skill development, hypothesis formation, prediction, cooperative learning (Dehghanpisheh, 1995).

Each pair of students receives two different forms of the same paragraph.
Students scan the passage to get the general idea.
Students take turns questioning each other to obtain missing information.
Open-ended questions should be encouraged; e.g., "What happened after X?" not "What goes in line three?"

Share Charts:

Each learner has a partially completed chart. Chart A has information that is missing from Chart B and vice versa. Each student must question his/her partner to obtain the missing information in the chart. Ideally the information is then used for some further communication purpose, such as making a shared decision or drawing joint conclusions from the information.

GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNING ACTIVITIES

- Collect realia
- Write your own summaries for infograms. You can footnote your sources and use material without fear of breaking copyrights.
- Adopt and read current news to be used for Inside/Outside game.
- Use printed material as a model for your own activities.
- Take notes on newscasts to be used for content in information gapping activities.
- Download information pages and newservice releases from the Internet.

GUIDELINES FOR ADAPTING MATERIAL TO LEVEL

- Move from more control of vocabulary, structure and task difficulty to more freedom and student choice in these activities.
- Provide more clues/prompts for lower levels. Provide question words below blanks for beginners/pre-intermediates (who? what?).This is not a test, the object is to encourage language fluency.
- Use the same exercise but vary task involved; i.e. lower-level classes, Infograms can be used as paired dictations.

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTENT-BASE APPROACH

- EFL teachers must work interdisciplinarily with content teachers. Such collaboration requires reciprocal relationships between instructors (Renner, 1994).

- Promote continuous language growth across grade levels. This can be achieved by consciously and systematically incorporating increasingly more advanced levels of language into the content areas at successively higher grade levels. When selecting content for language instruction, instructors need to consider the developmental aspects of language learning in order to prevent redundancy and stagnation (Collier 1987).
- EFL curriculum has traditionally been organized around a hierarchy of syntactic structures moving from simple to complex, content-based instruction removes these artificial distinctions from a communicative point of view. The communicative needs of the learner inform the teacher as to what and when a particular language element is to be taught (Goodman, 1986; Krashen, 1982; Met, 1991)
- Content-based language learning implies the integration of higher order thinking skills. Use of higher order thinking is desirable because it can stimulate learner interest in the content and thus in language, precisely because it is somewhat beyond their level of competence. Higher order thinking skills also promote higher order language skills which in turn enable students to reach higher levels of language proficiency.
- Finally, by integrating content and language the learners are "doing discourse" (Ellis 1984), that is to say "The procedures that the learner employs in using L2 knowledge are also the means by which new L2 knowledge is internalized."

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